



## The Power of 1989: New Perspectives on Revolutions

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### Abstract

This article is a review of *The Long 1989: Decades of Global Revolution*, a collective volume edited by Piotr H. Kosicki and Kyrill Kunakhovich, published in 2019 by CEU Press.

**Keywords:** 1989; revolution; social movements; Central and Eastern Europe

On 28 October 1989, during a live interview on *Dziennik Telewizyjny* [Television Journal], the Polish actress Joanna Szczepkowska said: "Ladies and gentlemen, on 4 June 1989 in Poland communism ended". It was nearly five months after the first partially free parliamentary elections in Poland since World War II. Although the elections of 1989 were not entirely democratic, they initiated the process of a peaceful transition to democracy in Poland. Regardless of whether there was communism in Poland or not, and whether the elections of 1989 finished it (Pakulski, 2010),<sup>1</sup> in the Polish collective

<sup>1</sup> The breakthrough of 1989 was more complex as it covered the Round Table negotiations in the spring of 1989, the already mentioned elections in June, and after that the formation of the Solidarity government in September 1989 – the first non-communist government in the Soviet Bloc.

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memory the year 1989 marks the beginning of a new social, cultural, and political reality. All these events and their far-reaching effects make us, Poles, think that 1989 happened predominantly in Poland. Moreover, we are convinced that in 1989 Poland was the center of the universe. Due to our "Polish centricity" we often forget that similar changes took place throughout Central and Eastern Europe; furthermore, we are hardly aware of their consequences for the rest of the world.

The collective volume *The Long 1989: Decades of Global Revolution* – edited by Piotr H. Kosicki and Kyryll Kunakhovich, published in 2019 as a result of the project and conference *The Global 1989: A New Generation*, held at Princeton University in 2009 – reminds us about the symbolic meaning and practical consequences of the year 1989 not only in the region where the revolution had started, but also far beyond variously defined Central and Eastern Europe. As the editors state, the nine authors of contributions collected in the volume consider "the slow, uneven spread of 'nineteen eighty-nine' across the world" (Kosicki & Kunakhovich, 2019, p. 2). So, this erratic proliferation of 1989 is examined on examples as various as Ukraine, China, South Africa, Afghanistan, Turkey, and the USA. Revolutionary events in Europe resonated not only thousands of miles away from there but also many years after 1989. The book proposes a reconfiguration in thinking about "the long 1989" by expanding the chronological and geographical scope as well as by taking into consideration its three aspects that are illustrated by the composition of the book.

The volume consists of three parts: "Politics and Policies", "Ideas and Ideologies", and "Myths and Mythmaking", showing three main ways of understanding the idea of 1989. The first one refers to 1989 perceived as a historical and political momentum. In the first article in Part One, Adrian Guelke and Tom Junes trace the linkages between the fall of communism in Poland and the demise of apartheid in South Africa, showing their structural commonalities in political trajectories that both countries have followed. The authors present not only international but even transcontinental flows of influences and a mechanism of diffusion that turns the revolution of 1989 into a global phenomenon. In this lens, the transfer of ideas seems much stronger than territorial limitations. In some cases inspirations did not extend beyond the names, as it was at Peking University, where students formed the Solidarity Student Union, but sometimes the impact of events in Europe was very direct, as it was in the case of the South African political party Solidarity.

In turn, Věra Exnerová takes us to Afghanistan to show the process of restoring Islam to the rank of national ideology as a result of Soviet intervention. Looking closer at this example, Exnerová argues that the end of the Cold War was not in any way the end of ideologies, as stated by Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1992). There, liberal ideology imposed by the West did not win. On the contrary, communism paved the way for a new transnational ideology: Islamism. It is worth noting that Islamist movements arose from internal power struggles within Muslim societies, rather than in opposition to communist rule. The rise of Central Asian Islamism, she argues, was a far-reaching consequence of the "long 1989".

As Exnerová shows, then, democracy is not the only direction in which revolutions can go. In this sense, 1989 differs completely from 1789, the year when the French Revolution commenced, in a plethora of fundamental respects. If we regard as accurate Bronisław Baczkó's observation that the French Revolution tended to constitute freedom and equality, led to the triumph of good and virtue, ensured happiness and welfare of each individual, brought justice, repaired the damages and finally punished those responsible for them (Baczko, 2010, p. 19), then we see that the effects of the long 1989 in Afghanistan are radically different. Moreover, this article seems very timely, especially today in the light of the Taliban offensive of 2021. Thus, the author invites us to tackle the issue one more time to update her conclusions.

The article "European Lessons for China: Tiananmen 1989 and Beyond" by Martin K. Dimitrov considers the spread of the idea of 1989 in the People's Republic of China. The author presents a sort of dramatic triangle consisting of leaders of the Soviet Union, countries of the Soviet Bloc (Romania and Albania), and the People's Republic of China. Dimitrov analyzes how the fall of communism fueled Chinese reforms carried out to avoid the revolution, but also shows how Romanian and Albanian communist leaders, close allies to China, were inspired by the Chinese scenario in terms of using violence against protesters in Timișoara and in Tirana. In this way, Dimitrov focuses not only on the results of 1989 in Asia but also on feedback loops, that is, how outputs of 1989 in China were routed back as political inputs for some European countries.

As we can conclude from the first part of the book, the breakthrough of 1989 in Europe was a force as destructive as it was constructive. It weakened apartheid in South Africa but, at the same time, it resulted in strengthening dictatorships in the Middle East and China. If major political changes could be seen as a milestone, as an episode, or as a hinge (Tilly, 1977, p. 494), the revolution of 1989 was definitely the last one: it fundamentally changed the political directions, social organizations, and general drift of history.

The second part of the book, entitled "Ideas and Ideologies", reveals the ideological potential of 1989 and presents selected aspects of the axiological system of revolutions of that time. This part contributes enormously to the field of intellectual history as it unveils the intellectual dimension of three different ideas. In his article "Dialogical Democracy: King, Michnik, and the American Culture Wars", Jeffrey Stout presents the linkage between the idea of dialogue promoted by the Polish intellectual Adam Michnik and postulates formulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. Stout analyzes dialogue as an alternative for the antagonizing antinomy: secularism vs. theocracy, which he sums up as follows:

Secularists propose to free the public sphere from religion, which is equivalent to expecting everyone to speak and think *as if they were non-religious* when engaging in politics. Theocrats think that the authority of the political order rests on a given set of religious assumptions. Secularists want politics to be conducted without reference to sacred value, while theocrats want politics to be conducted on the basis of a privileged conception of sacred value. (Stout, 2019, pp. 103–104)

This issue appears to be very current also today, in the time of culture wars that are carried out in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe (such as Poland, Croatia, or Hungary). In the simplest terms, culture wars are “a permanent state of tension between the traditional and postmodern ways of solving moral problems” (Burszta, 2013, p. 105). They are clashes of universalism and relativism, collectivism and individualism. To be more precise, they are clashes of the neo-traditionalist (mostly theocratic) and liberal (mostly secular) worldviews (Melito, 2021, p. 2). As they are “no longer simply a battle of definitions, but a global conflict [...] a matter of actual politics, not just academic ones” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 52), leaders and participants of those wars should learn a lesson from 1989, especially one about dialogue as a political strategy.

In the next article, entitled provocatively “The Virtue of Not Inventing Anything”, István Rév analyzes factors that prevented the events of 1989 from turning violent and blocked the outbreak of a classic, i.e. bloody, revolution. In this case, as the author argues, the lesson of history from the bloody French and Bolshevik Revolutions, as well as from dramatic events in Prague (1968) and Budapest (1956) has been learned: the revolution of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe did not turn into a rough and violent rebellion. The author builds on the idea of human rights that helped to avert radicalisms, extremisms, and violence. He accentuates that one of the biggest achievements of 1989 was “civilized, negotiated, nonviolent way of introducing the processes and institutions of liberal democracy under the rule of law, in place of the long decades and centuries of almost uninterrupted law of rule” (Rév, 2019, p. 87). Yet, the author points out that the legacy of 1989 is not always treated with adequate solemnity. On the contrary:

What is taking place in Hungary now is, without a doubt, a counterrevolution, but it is definitively not the continuation of what was started in 1989. What has been taking place is rather the opposite: an attempt to discard the achievements of the 1989 peaceful revolution; to eradicate everything that was accomplished by the heroic act of not experimenting with dangerous ideas. (Rév, 2019, p. 158)

The diagnosis of ongoing illiberal counterrevolutions also recalls the contemporary situation in Poland. The legacy of 1989 has been progressively betrayed, first by liberal politicians (disinterest in social goals and cuts in this respect, bloodthirsty capitalism without limitations, which resulted in growing social inequalities, the betrayal of the idea of solidarity), and then since 2015 by conservative factions (undermining democracy, attacks on the independence of the judiciary, nursing nationalist rhetoric, dangerously tightening the marriage of church and state, but also open disavowing, discrediting and undermining the credibility of politicians from Solidarity circles). A similar situation is also observed in Serbia, where the politics of the current president Aleksandar Vučić is a complete squandering and betrayal of the values for which the masses fought in the streets during the protests of 1996/97 and in their final in 2000 (the local equivalent of 1989), symbolized by the departure of the autocrat Slobodan Milošević. Despite the several years of intensive

work for liberal democracy, we are now witnessing a drastic move to autocracy in Serbia, as well as consistent and systematic misappropriation of the idea of freedom, limiting democracy, and growing media censorship. In both countries, experiments with different forms of non-democratic rule are taking place, and the idea of human rights (LGBT rights, women's rights) is constantly challenged. Bearing in mind that the revolution of 1989 was not only the fall of inefficient political and economic systems but also (or above all) a civil revolution, the question of the legacy of 1989 in countries where it actually happened should again become the topic of academic reflection.

The last chapter in this part, "The Rule of Law after the Short Twentieth Century: Launching a Global Career" by Martin Krygier, scrutinizes the idea of the rule of law, which became popular after 1989 as a foundation of legal systems in newly democratic states in Central and Eastern Europe. Krygier also shows how this "confident triumphal package for export" (Krygier, 2019, p. 177), imposed by the West, affected public discourse. It is the only article in the book that makes use of the concept of the bipolar division of the political world when it comes to ideas and territories (Krygier, 2019, p. 165). Within these frames, the author shows the transfer of the idea of human rights and, analogically, the rule of law. He traces Samuel Moyn's claim that the idea of human rights was imposed by the Western political and intellectual milieu as a new moral language "for an ideologically exhausted and politically blocked time" (Krygier, 2019, p. 168). Krygier, then, presents transfer of ideas in the reverse direction, and considers the Western industry of ideas and the ways they are imposed. In this light, the revolution of 1989 was not only a centrifugal force, but a process actively followed (and stimulated) by Western political centers and think tanks. This was well illustrated by Boris Buden, who wrote that the image of the fall of the Berlin Wall, representing the fall of communism, contains the whole truth. In the photos from that moment, we can see the masses crossing the wall but we cannot see what they saw. The iconic document of their revolutionary deed was recorded in the gaze of those who were on the western side of the wall, and therefore did not take an active part in these events. The symbolic representation was thus created outside (Buden, 2012, p. 18).

Finally, the last part of the book, entitled "Myths and Mythmaking", presents 1989 as a mythologem shaping and organizing contemporary thinking about revolutions and social movements. All three articles contained in this part argue that the legacy of 1989 is still alive, not fully past, and that it still serves as the frame of reference for any mass mobilization around the globe.

In his article "Catalyst of History: Francis Fukuyama, the Iraq War, and the Legacies of 1989 in the Middle East", Samuel Helfont considers the impact of Francis Fukuyama's essay *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), in which the author argued that the end of the Cold War was at the same time "the end of history"; in other words, the universalization of Western liberal democracy and its triumph over other political visions. Helfont not only puts under scrutiny how Fukuyama's thesis has created popular perceptions of the Middle East, but also tackles a problem of the agency of scholarly texts and their

influence on political reality. It is not by accident that Fukuyama's essay is a very important point of reference for almost every article in *The Long 1989*. The popularity of Fukuyama's book and the global excitement about the thesis he proposed could be the reasons for overlooking the early signals of the neoconservative ideological turn coming up.

In the article "Social Movement vs. Social Arrest: The Global Occupations of the Twenty-First Century", Mehmet Dösemeci proposes the farthest departure from 1989, but at the same time the most profound analysis of post-1989 revolutionary practices. The author sees 1989 as a point of departure for any contemporary mass mobilization. He explores different uprisings since 2011 through a global lens, focusing on the most common contemporary form of mass protest: the continuous occupation of public space or, as he calls it, "social arrest" (Dösemeci, 2019, pp. 217–220). He presents how social arrest turned public squares into sites of democratic self-institutions, and how the phenomenon of occupying public places contributes to the redefining of democracy. Finally, he analyzes how the new type of subjectivity is constructed during social arrest protests. To some extent, the article corresponds with Helfont's observations in terms of challenging Fukuyama's hegemonic theory. Dösemeci claims that the West subscribed to this theory uncritically, which in turn resulted in the conviction that revolutions could not create political orders other than liberal democracy. It is also noteworthy that uprisings organized since 2011, especially those in the USA and other Western countries, such as Occupy Wall Street (2011), are usually perceived as excesses and not as revolutions (or even seeds of revolutions) because from the Western perspective revolution in the system of liberal democracy is impossible. By contrast, the uprising in Turkey or the Arab Spring, which were against dictatorship or authoritarian regimes, in epistemological terms are usually seen as revolutions. Following this argument, it would be interesting to carry out similar analyses concerning protests in countries such as Serbia, where in theory the system of power is not authoritarian, but political practices of President Vučić, called the EU's favorite dictator, to some extent show signs of authoritarianism. There is no doubt that the US commitment to the overthrow of the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s and the multilevel support granted to Serbs in 2000 contributed to the perception of this long process as a revolution (it is even called the 5th October Revolution). The Western perspective and attitudes determined and shaped not only events but also their names. In this light, it is interesting to examine whether uprisings against semi-authoritarian forms of government could also be viewed as revolutions and named accordingly.

In the last chapter, entitled "Euromaidan and the 1989 Legacy: Solidarity in Action?", Valeria Korablyova shows Ukrainian Euromaidan through the lens of the idea of solidarity and the concept of "the solidarity of the shaken". The author studies how these ideas impacted and shaped the revolution of 2014 in Ukraine. Korablyova stresses that the Western readings and interpretations of the Ukrainian revolution illustrate the deep misunderstanding in political and intellectual milieus. There is a strong claim articulated in Korablyova's article that Eastern European revolutions should not be treated as an affirmation of liberal

democracies but as the quest for their own forms of democracy. As the author argues, “the model of ‘civil democracy’ as it emerged in the 1980s in East-Central Europe, presupposes a bigger role for civil society (the power of the people) while restraining the state” (Korablyova, 2019, p. 251). That should be perceived as the characteristic feature of social movements at these latitudes.

In *The Long 1989*, the breakthrough of that year is presented not just as past events but as multifaceted processes that are still in progress in different places around the globe. The authors show a variety of changes all over the world that were affected by the changeover in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Western influences that determined and shaped the last revolution in the twentieth century. They trace the diffusion of the idea under scrutiny in spatial and temporal terms, showing various ways of understanding the concept of revolution and, to some extent, presenting semantic tensions between the concept of revolution and counterrevolution. In this way, the publication contributes to the field of history of ideas. By showing entangled paths of this wandering idea of peaceful revolution and examining the nature of the post-1989 world order, the authors present revolutions of 1989 as a cultural and political pattern. As they trace the diffusion of the idea under scrutiny spatially and temporally, the volume could also serve as a handbook of exploring migrating ideas in their meandering historical and social semantics. In this area it perfectly corresponds with other projects devoted to history of wandering ideas, such as the ten-volume *Leksykon idei wędrownych na słowiańskich Bałkanach, XVIII–XXI wiek* [Lexicon of Migrating Ideas in the Slavic Balkans, 18th–20th centuries].<sup>2</sup>

Although the book starts with a quote from Joseph de Maistre which refers to the French Revolution, it proposes a revision of perceiving the events of 1789 as a paradigm of uprisings. Instead of that, the authors move the center of gravity toward the revolutions of 1989 and examine them as a new cultural and political pattern of social movements. As Timothy Garton Ash commented: “There is no longer any doubt that 1989 has become the early twenty-first century’s default model and metaphor for revolution. Forget 1917, 1848, or 1789” (Garton Ash, 2011).

It is hard to exhaustively discuss the repertoire of possible ideas, symbols, and practices of revolutions of 1989. The literature in this field is growing, reflecting on ever newer dimensions, aspects, and consequences of 1989 (see e.g. Ghodsee & Orenstein, 2021). Yet, there are still some areas that remain uncovered and several topics that could be examined in the potential second volume of the publication. As there is no doubt that such a continuation would enrich our scientific landscape, I would strongly encourage authors and editors to take up this challenge. Bearing in mind that today we face the intensification of neo-conservative movements and the attendant change of narratives about the past and iconoclastic gestures towards own heroes, the question about possible revisions and re-evaluations of 1989 should also be raised. Moreover, by tackling the topic of the religious

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ispan.waw.pl/ireteslaw/handle/20.500.12528/1076>

context of revolutions, *The Long 1989* invites us to rethink the question of religion and its rebirth as a new ideology and a potential fuel for future revolutions. In turn, the question of contemporary secularism in Central and Eastern Europe in the context of 1989 could be also worth thinking about.

Another topic worth considering would be the iconosphere produced during the revolutions of 1989 and its influence on new social movements. Separate studies could be devoted to semantic shifts in the frame of this iconosphere as well as to contemporary recycling and reuse of images. The logotype "Solidarność" and its reuse comes to me first of all, but the question is more complicated: what visual revolutionary discourses were produced, which of them are recycled? For example, did the revolution of 1989 create a specific iconography of solidarity, of workers, of protests in general? Moreover, the topic of memory of social movements (Berger et al., 2021) in 1989 would also be worth considering: how memory was used to instigate and legitimate political action in 1989, and how memory of 1989 was used to ignite and steer the course of different social movements.

Finally, the authors show political parallels and analogies far away, but the examination of whether – and, if so, how – the 1989 impacted events in not so distant Yugoslavia in the 1990s would also be interesting. There are some attempts which present how the revolution of 1989 challenged the idea of Yugoslavia (Gagnon, 2010; Hockenos, 2019) but they neither examine the spread of the idea of revolution nor present the proliferation of political inspirations that permeated Yugoslav society.

Following Bronisław Baczko's constatation that democratic institutions, as opposed to revolutionary passions, operate in the long run and they aim to ensure civil rights and equality of all before the law, to establish the rule of law and to cultivate the civic spirit (Baczko, 2010, p. 19), the processes that started in 1989 had more in common with democratic institutions than with revolution as we know it from late eighteenth-century France. Their distinctive feature was an attempt to construct their own version of civil democracy based on the idea of solidarity. The revolution of 1989 eliminated from its vocabulary words like violence, terror, and power. Their leaders did not want to charge the barricades. On the contrary, they negotiated the new socio-political order and formed modern civil society. The dilemma of nineteenth-century leftist movements – whether reformist or revolutionary – was not the dilemma of 1989. That is the reason it is sometimes called "refolution" (Garton Ash, 1990, p. 2).

Did we learn the lesson from 1989? Even if it is not the aim of the book, the authors try to convince us that the legacy of 1989 is already well-established and it serves as a reservoir of symbols, ideas, and practices. But only a new turnover would check whether it has really made a profound impact. When we observe the current political situation in Central and Eastern Europe, huge tensions between representatives of opposite ideological camps and ongoing culture wars, it is difficult to definitely rule out the possibility of the next revolution. Or maybe even a counterrevolution?

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## O sile roku 1989. Nowe spojrzenia na rewolucje

### Abstrakt

Tekst stanowi prezentację i recenzję publikacji *The Long 1989: Decades of Global Revolution* pod redakcją Piotra H. Kosickiego i Kyrilla Kunakhovicha, opublikowanej w 2019 roku przez wydawnictwo CEU Press.

**Słowa kluczowe:** 1989; rewolucja; ruchy społeczne; Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia

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